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Melancholy and the Continent of Fire

Andrea Witcomb, Tom Bristow

We live in the most fire prone landscape on Earth. Victoria has been shaped by fire over millennia. It is a natural and essential part of Australia's ecosystem and eucalypt landscape. As climate is becoming more variable and more people are living closer to bushland, fire will continue to impact our lives.

Department of Sustainability and Environment

Forest Gallery, Melbourne

The anonymous words that we have chosen for our epigraph implicitly address climate change in a gallery largely defined by the sublime experience of human immersion within a vast living ecosystem. Their impersonality mirrors the unnamed aesthetic emotions of this gallery. And yet, it is this tension between the scale and pace of geological agency and the places and practices of human culture, clearly alluded to within this understatement, which we wish to address in this essay. The quotation constitutes the display label for the first information panel that visitors read as they access 'The Clearing': the final space in the multi-layered Forest Gallery, a living forest ecosystem in the Museum of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The gallery is housed in an open-air, mesh enclosed area: 1,485 square metres, 27m wide and 55m long; the roof is 15m high at the lowest point and 35m high at the highest. Inside the forest that is the gallery, there are three distinct zones structuring the visitor experience. The subterranean entrance is dominated by a river and its amphibious life; the forest proper comes next, largely alert to season signage and its sensual life-world; then an end space, 'The Clearing,' partly terminates the experience while also conditioning visitors' second reading of the other

two zones as they exit by walking back down the hill through the forest, the seasons, and the river.

Visitors read the information panel that we have cited as they cross a threshold taking them out of an experience of seven indigenous seasons (indexed as ‘climate’ by the signage), across a warning sign on the ground—a metal plate embossed with the words ‘climate’ and ‘fire’—into an alluring and melancholic space that is a testament to differing yet related cultural experiences of fire. As we will show, this conflation of time and space invites further inquiry into the relations between climate change and landscape clearing with respect to the physiological ecology of forest production, fire ecology and succession. When visitors walk towards the edge of the forest, the gallery appears to be an organism shaped by environmental forces driven by human hands; here, an emergent museological amalgam compresses relations between indigenous knowledge, settler practice and different forms and frequencies of clearing, regrowth and regeneration on the island continent throughout its troubled history. The space feels like an endgame or political impasse, which can only be resolved by new configurations of memory and learning. Ultimately, it is a memorial with an aesthetic strategy to instruct the visitor on the aftermath of settler colonialism as cultural and environmental clearance. Yet the gallery’s ethical imperative is not told but performed in an affective threading together of distinct cultural practices and various climate change consequences. How, then, is this instruction not to repeat history put together, and how does it manifest itself?



Figure 1 -Water Zone, Forest Gallery, by Jon Augier with permission of Museum Victoria

To begin to answer that question we need to understand not only the rationale behind the gallery—its intellectual genealogy, but also the ways in which this genealogy is embodied in a range of interpretative strategies that play to the ways in which visitors experience the space—as a sensorial experience, as a medium of rational instruction on the ecology of the ash forest and its history, as a history of human engagement with the forest, and ultimately as an emotional experience. The latter is somewhat heightened as we engage with the memories of catastrophic fires and the impact of colonization at the end of the gallery. We carry that experience with us as we walk back through the whole space in order to exit, reinterpreting what we have seen through the filtering affective lens of loss, destruction and displacement.

Emerging Environmental Histories

In many ways, the Forest Gallery is a complex amalgam of differing regimes of time, different forms of expert knowledge and an expression of differing relationships to a specific place—the ash forests of the Dandenong Ranges. Its origins lie in former Museum Victoria’s director, Graham Morris’ (1990–98) desire for a ‘living space’ in the heart of the museum to counteract the idea that museums were full of dead objects. Whilst this vision was shaped by a particular moment in time during which museums sought to overcome their ‘dusty glass case’ image by embracing experiential exhibitions, the idea also came at a time when Museum Victoria was also experimenting with new approaches for engaging with indigenous histories and new ways of thinking about the relationship between nature and culture (Rasmussen, 2001). These approaches were largely driven in Australia by the new modes of environmental histories then emerging, which contributed directly to the planning behind the Gallery (Griffiths, 2001, p. 198).¹ The rise of environmental history at this time was itself allied to revisionist movements that sought to include the experiences of those written out of history—the working class, black people, and women. Its contribution was adding nature as one of the agents of history, at the same time as acknowledging that nature and culture are no longer dichotomous.² It is no surprise then that this gallery sought to build on 1970s and 1980s arguments that Australians needed to reconcile their historical experience with the place they had colonized by recreating an iconic Victorian landscape—the ash forests of the Dandenong Ranges—from the perspectives of both the indigenous and settler populations that engaged with it as well as those of natural environments themselves. Central to the interdisciplinary premise of environmental history and its objectives, then, is the need to understand the historical ecologies of humans and non-humans—an aim that our epigraph also speaks to.

¹ See for example Rolls (1981); Griffiths (1992).

² Consider also the exploration of environmental history in the National Museum of Australia’s gallery, ‘Old New Land: Australia’s People and Environment,’ Canberra, ACT.

This is an aim that Griffiths (2001) elucidates in his epilogue to the book that accompanies this Gallery. Griffiths argues that late twentieth century forms of environmental history spring ‘from a contemporary sense of crisis about the human ecological predicament’—the awareness that our activities have a deep impact on nature’s own cycles of life and therefore on our own sustainability. In so doing, these histories often move ‘audaciously across time and space and species and thereby challenge some of the conventions of history by questioning the anthropocentric, nationalistic and documentary biases of their craft’ (194). They do so, in part, by treating nature as an agent, as a subject in its own right, rather than simply as the object of human activity. It is partly ironic, then, to read an image of Griffiths’s book on a carbon sink exemplar: embossed on the bark of an interpretation of the mountain ash forest east of Melbourne, his text marks one of the cluster of trees in ‘The Clearing’ that is a history of the entanglements between humans and non-humans, forming an intricate web of carbon fluxes. In these histories, nature has its own history, its own rhythms and biological processes, which we would do well to understand or simply acknowledge, as these rhythms and processes have their own impact on human lives (191).³ An informed environmental history, then, offers not only an understanding of the ecology of any given place, a perspective that enriches natural history, but it also offers a warning—a warning that, is given particular moral force by its treatment of fire as both a natural regenerative force and a force of destruction with the power to change our environment—both human and non-human. As one of the elemental forces this gallery engages with (the others being water and earth), fire speaks to urban and rural demographics in distinct ways; yet ultimately, in this gallery, it is viewed as the agent before which our audacity to play with nature comes back to haunt us, forcing us to rethink our relationship to both nature and indigenous knowledge of how to live with it. That specific hauntological poetics does not offer a pastoral dialogue between urban and rural spaces but invites the visitor to entertain a generalized metaphor for climate change in their imagination: to feel a

³ The gallery does not cover the rural/urban distinction, which is a significant omission owing to the issue of mountain ash forests on the periphery of the city of Melbourne.

specific desire for a future wherein climate is not premised on our indulgence in fossil fuels. That the warning comes in the shape of three memorials—to the forests, to indigenous people, and to those who died and suffered as a result of catastrophic fires—points to the ways in which our understanding of the issues at stake can involve a reappraisal of our relationships and entanglement in colonial attitudes to both the natural world, and indigenous people and their knowledge. For it is these memorials that give new meaning to the three histories that together constitute the eco-cultural foundations of environmental histories in Australia—ecology, indigenous and settler histories.⁴

Moving Through Time

Before entering the gallery proper (the forest), a unique object invites visitors to rethink their relationship with history. A cross-section of kauri pine (*Agathis robusta*) dominates the external gallery entrance; over six hundred years old and eight foot six inches in diameter, the north Queensland tree's rings are clearly marked to prompt visitors to think of change and its representation as they step into this extensive living space.⁵ A monument of growth over the centuries and a sign of widespread logging in the late 1800s and 1900s, the smooth-barked coniferous tree refers to two of the gallery's five timescales: the appearance of Earth's first life forms (3.8 b.y.a.), the emergence of the ancient supercontinent Gondwana (510–180 m.y.a.) and its distribution of eucalypts (from the early Eocene, 51.9 m.y.a.), indigenous settlement (40–80,000 y.a.), the colonial period (1788–1850), and the post/neo-colonial present. The gallery is explicitly divided

⁴ For these particular foundations we draw inspiration from Beattie et al. (2015).

⁵ These trees grow in the rainforests of the Atherton Tableland in Queensland, a fertile plateau some 3,000km from Melbourne, and a World Heritage listed area. The IUCN places the tree within the 'least concern' conservation status category. Melbourne Museum signage reads: 'this specimen symbolises the loss of "big trees", once common in Australian forests.' The tree is cousin to the equally widely felled New Zealand Kauri (a Maori word that endures in Australia).

into five zones overlapping the timescales and depicting specific agents of change: water, earth processes, climate, fire and human intervention.

Entering through a liminal space that protects the rest of the museum from the elements of the green and moist forest beyond, exposed as this gallery is to the external climate, the visitor is suddenly in the fresh, moist air of the rain forest. Before them is a flowing stream cascading over some rocks into an inviting pool full of marine and plant life surrounded by lush green ferns. A nineteenth-century European might be forgiven for thinking that we are in Eden, and at the source of all life—water. As we turn the corner and enter an underground space built into the hill that is the Forest Gallery we go beneath the creek which, on the day we visited, was pouring steam into the underground passage, so cold was the August air. In the midst of this mist and the roaring sound of the water we sense the power of water, a power that is then confirmed by two accounts of the creation of the Yarra river, which the creek above references. One, from a geologist, talks about the formation of the landscape we know as the Dandenong Ranges, as water carves its way through soft rock and makes its way from the mountains to the sea. Scientific it may be, but our impression is of a sublime landscape, grand in design, rich in detail, intensely sensuous. The other, based on the local Kulin people's Dreamtime stories, tells of the creation of the river by Wurundjeri ancestors, Barwool and Yan-yan, against attempts to stop them by Baw Baw and Donna Buang.⁶ Both accounts embed us in primeval time. As we emerge out of the darkness, from water into earth, we also move in time. Here it is the minutiae of life that confronts us rather than the grandeur of rivers and mountains as we are invited to peer into the life of the creek by means of little windows into it. There we find frogs hiding on moss and liverwort covered rocks. Called by the sound of birds we look up at the majestic trees towering above us. As we walk up the hill past the threshold that divides the water and earth bands, our attention is drawn to the intricate design of nature: observing leaves, we see a wide array of insects camouflaged against them, and lizards alternatively hiding in or basking on the rocks that line the creek. On the banks,

⁶ Donna Buang and Baw Baw form part of the Dividing Range, a mountain range that divides the eastern coastal lands of Eastern Australia from its drier western regions.

birds scratch away, looking for worms and other insects, while butterflies hover. The delicate balance between all living things, micro and macro, is there for us to witness as we begin to comprehend how tight and dynamic relations between various forms of life are and yet also how the history of geological formations, alongside the composition of the earth's atmosphere, set down the conditions for localized ecologies to emerge later in time. The experience is both sensual and cognitive, the mind challenged to think of a set of relationships and feeling them out; to envision and be affected by a stretched matrix of life spread over a slowly changing and elasticated space. Thus, while beech forests survive as relics from the ancient Gondwanaland in moist, dark nooks, their leaves turned up towards the sun, eucalypts, with their narrow droopy leaves emerge as the land dries out in response to the movement of tectonic plates and the consequent break up of Gondwana. Importantly, these new trees develop a survival mechanism in the increasing heat and dryness, requiring intense fires to germinate. While fire destroys the ancient forests of beech, it is the source of life for the mountain ash trees. Fire thus emerges as the other great natural power, capable of shaping the landscape—though at this stage, its agency is not yet fully revealed. There is however a word of caution—the ash tree, the eucalyptus, is only adapted to withstand *occasional* intense fires—by implication, frequent fires lead not to its regeneration but its destruction—an implication that comes back to haunt us in full force, in the 'The Clearing.'⁷

The aesthetic experience of the forest however, with its invitation to look both closely into the daily life of its inhabitants while moving through geological time begins to communicate a sense that time itself does not stand still, that the forest changes and that its shape and characteristics are all part of a large story that we barely comprehend. Fire and climate are central to this story. The gallery thus begins to emerge not just as a re-

⁷ Bill Gammage argues that Aboriginal use of fire was planned and precise, suppressing insect plagues and regulating kangaroo populations. It 'was scalpel more than sword, taming the most fire-prone country on earth to welcome its periodic refreshing, its kiss of life. Far from today's safe and unsafe fires, campfire and bushfire were one; far from feared enemy, fire was the closest ally' (2011, p. 185).

creation of an environment but a form of storytelling, operating in the same vein as Graham Huggan's understanding of storied atmosphere which he sees as 'blend[ing] the phenomenological idea of *landscape*' —facts experienced by a sensitive being— with that 'of *climate*[,] the intuitive apprehension of a larger reality' (Huggan, 2015, p. 96). Drawing from Julian Knebusch, Huggan understands such storied ambience as an ensemble, which involves the 'opening [up of] an atmospheric relation to the world' (Knebusch, 2008, p. 247). This relationship is brought to mind most specifically as one of establishing conditions for life. Climate change belongs to scientific and theological discourses; the experience of its changes belongs to the sphere of human and non-human experience. Our aesthetic and sensorial experiences, etched in the sense of wonder that is attached to our cultural notions of the sublime, trigger a desire to either comprehend or enter into a relationship with the larger forces that are present in the Forest Gallery. Intuitively we reach for specific illustrations of a dynamic atmosphere and we attempt to place this within a cultural history of the cooling of the poles and a dramatic warming of the tropics, yet these narratives are markedly absent. In reaching for something that does not exist, we come to realise our own delicate presence in this landscape of fire south of the equator. Rather than fill this gap with science, it is to the engagement of people with this very landscape as they experience another sense of time—that of the seasons—that the gallery now turns, an engagement already signalled by the presence of Dreamtime stories at the beginning of time itself when we first encounter the creation of the Yarra river.⁸ Here, the redistribution of energy by the circulation of atmosphere and oceans is witnessed through the lens of a lunar year registered in highly localized place-based oral histories of nuanced habitable conditions that connect micro-events with the larger process of setting the earth's climate.

⁸ The creek connects to the Yarra, a perennial river which flows over 240 kilometers from its source in the Yarra Ranges (eastern and northeastern suburbs of Melbourne) to Hobsons Bay in northernmost Port Philip; the river name is understood to be mistranslated (rather than adapted) from 'Yarro Yarro' meaning 'ever flowing' in the Boonworrung language.

Climatic Seasonal Encounters

The gallery's climate zone runs horizontally from one side of the portrait-shaped rectangular space to another, leading to the fire zone and ultimately into 'The Clearing'. This route is structured by a wooden pathway edged by a single curve on the upper side, and a winding and turning series of curves on the lower. The shape to the path reflects the course of the creek through the landscape and thus connects the climate path to the creation of life by the impact of water in the earlier zones; however, the series of curves most directly mirrors a flowing glass ribbon inserted into the forest, presenting the Aboriginal seasonal calendar of the Upper Yarra Valley. This connection, in turn, refers to a local culture that is located between two historical periods referred to by the Kauri Pine at the gallery entrance (the distribution of eucalypts in Gondwana, and the colonial period) that run on into the present: the Kulin peoples, a loose confederation of five Aboriginal groups with commonalities in language, custom, traditions, burial rites and trade, who identify themselves as a nation.⁹ Traditionally, the Kulin people lived as hunters and gatherers, in campsites whose positions were largely determined by seasonal changes in the weather and availability of foods. The interrelationship between weather patterns, star movements, and the changes in life cycles of plants and animals 'form the seasonal markers used to determine when a particular event may occur or when it was necessary to relocate' (Allen, 2001, p. 58).¹⁰

⁹ They are The Wurundjeri People, The Bunurong or Boonerwung People, The Wathaurong People, The Taungurong People, and the Dja Dja Wurrung or Jaara People.

¹⁰ Lindy Allen provides a complete outline of the season band in her piece 'Coranderrk Calendar' in Griffiths (2001, 58–59). Ribbon signage reads: 'The Kulin have a detailed local understanding of the seasons and the environment. Each season is marked by the movement of the stars in the night sky and changes in the weather coinciding with the life cycles of plants and animals.' Rose (2008) and Toussaint (2008) contend that while daily Aboriginal experience is not alert to climate change, their communities will be shaped by climate change.

Local ecologies resulting from or influenced by the prevailing seasons are placed in the gallery as examples of the natural world that can track changes in the larger cycles of Earth's life. To the Kulin people, 'this country enjoys an annual cycle of seven seasons and two non-annual seasons—the Fire season that occurs about every seven years; and the flooding season that has a cycle of approximately 28 years' (Allen, 2001).¹¹ For Bill Gammage (2011), an 'ecological philosophy' compelled the earliest Australians to care for country: 'Knowing which plants welcome fire, and when and how much, was critical to managing land. Plants could then be burnt and not burnt in patterns, so that post-fire regeneration could situate and move grazing animals predictably by selectively locating the feed and shelter they prefer' (1). The gallery is leading us towards a narrative of fire within a fire-prone landscape wherein, according to Gammage, 70 per cent of Australia's plants need or tolerate fire. Accompanying this narrative is a coupling of human and natural systems, which the gallery then places within an ethical context for reviewing our practices by inflecting an agent-based model of understanding of which human culture—particularly colonial impact and its indigenous counterpoint—are at the front and centre. This shift to human time will eventually involve a reappraisal of the relations between different temporal scales as the intensity of our human activities on the rhythms of the slower paced geological and climatic time scales is revealed. The final result is the promotion of an understanding of the social-ecological system east of Melbourne as one section of a continental, fire-ridden tapestry increasingly under pressure from the external driver of human-induced global climate change. For now, however, the gallery begins by celebrating the country's climate, its diversity, and its changes, pointing to the ways in which the appreciation of these phenomena by humans is a crucial element to establishing sustainable relations of organisms and species to each other and to their physical surroundings. Thus 'Luk', or Eel season, is defined by the ceasing of hot winds—the cooling temperature and the flowering of the Binap Manna Gum signal that the eel is fat and ready for harvesting. It is followed by 'Waring', or Wombat season,

¹¹ NB the cyclic calendar represented by the season ribbon does not strictly correlate with a 12-month calendar. This installation was produced by the Melbourne Museum in association with Woi wurrung and Daung wurrung people. (Allen, 2001).

defined by the highest rainfall and lowest temperatures, which sign of the emergence of the wombat to bask and graze in the sun. This narrative of earth dynamism runs on as 'Waring' gives over to 'Guling', or Orchid season, when the ae-noke caterpillars of the common brown butterfly feed on grasses at night and orchids flower. Next is 'Poorneet', or Tadpole season, with temperatures rising but rain continuing, while pied currawongs call loudly and flax-lillies are flowering. Bullyong bats catch insects in flight while kangaroo grass is flowering during the 'Buath Gurra' or Grass Flowering Season that comes next; and this season's warmth gives way to the changeable thundery weather of 'Kangaroo-Apple Season' with fruiting bali (cherry ballart) and apple bushes close by the active goannas.



Figure 2 – Visitors on Boardwalk, Forest Gallery, by Rob Blackburn with permission of Museum Victoria

All these events can be assumed by the appearance of constellations, which are offered equal representation on the ribbon. The Southern Cross, the most represented asterism of the southern hemisphere, has guided travellers on the dry continent for thousands of years, and has entered the cultures of Australia and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Samoa, Chile and Brazil. This young constellation (8–11 m.y.a.) is referenced as high in the south at sunrise during the final season, ‘Biderap’ or Dry Season when the tussock-grass is long and dry, and high temperatures complement low rainfall. There is much attention to the life surrounding the ribbon—explicit reference points include the farming of orchids, which can be seen to be stimulated by the Autumn temperature, and special signs for the stick insect’s lifespan across the seasons, in addition to labels for the rarest plants of Victoria’s tall forest— but human culture is far from absent: it is woven into an unnamed global fabric that the cosmological signage points to, not in terms of origins but of general structure.

In direct allusion to intergenerational stories that pass on knowledge, cultural values and belief systems, known as The Dreaming,¹² the ribbon presents four indigenous voices bringing into view their relationship with the seasons.¹³ Martha Nevin speaks of when her foraging band would set up a line for eels in the lagoons, and provides instructions to catch a codfish with a frog; Jessi Hunter remarks on the similarity between meat samples from wombat, pork, porcupine and echidna and how her Granny Jemima would pick and boil orchids as a remedy for headaches. Local history and the excitement of learning from local culture is picked up by Brian Paterson pointing to a gap in our memory for how swagmen, drovers and stockmen made damper (soda bread) from seeds, while also commenting on how to predict a storm two or three days in advance by listening to the birds who descend from the mountains. Tangible memory is joyously felt in Dot Peters’ remembrance of tussock grass growing tall enough for her to hide inside when playing

¹² The Dreaming, or ‘Tjukurrpa’—a translation from the Arrernte word ‘Altyrrenge’—means ‘to see and understand the law.’

¹³ These are the results of Museum Victoria interviews with the Kulin peoples. At the time of writing, Jessie Hunter, Martha Nevin and Brian Paterson had passed away.

games as a child, while her story also leaves the visitor to ponder whether the grass is native and if it indicates one of many grasslands under pressure owing to climate change.¹⁴ These fact-ridden quotations of cultural practices invoke how Aboriginal knowledge, law and religion respects storytelling, and how economic and ecological responsibilities have the ritual forms of the Dreaming at their centre, and how some of this knowledge can inform our narratives of climatic alterations. For Rose, ecological knowledge is organized by indigenous peoples' 'observation and experience of interactive local events' and a 'patterned communicative domain of ecological time' (2005, p. 39). Primarily conceived as an educational space where life in the forest is shown to respond to the changing seasons, the spiritual lives of Aborigines, and their explanation of land formations, animal behaviour and plant remedies is not translated—it is physically applied to the ribbon in dialogue with the science of standard signage. The seasons ribbon does not directly address the relationships between land, animals and people that the ancestor spirits of Australian Aborigines transformed into after moving through the earth in human form; however, the resultant animals, minerals and vegetables that we know today, created by these spirits, are described as characteristics of biodiversity aligned to seasonal variation and cosmological knowledge, and they are animated by the voices of the Kulin: these voices represent 'human ways of communicating about a communicative system formed through connectivity' (34).

This extensive moment of oral history explains the nature of environmental indicators for the health of ecosystems, and it depicts human knowledge and action calibrated to the dimensions of seasonal time in the wake of the events of geological and evolutionary time. This model of explanation and storytelling is revisited with compelling results in

¹⁴ Charles Dawson's reading of Gammage places the idea of grasslands as one part of the Australian aboriginal ecology that was 'managed': once palatable, they attracted large marsupials that were hunted (Dawson, 2013, p. 96–97). Nearly 250 million acres of the outback are carpeted by grasslands; one of the few remaining large-scale natural areas of the Earth containing some of the most vulnerable patches of our environment, now threatened by mining, invasive species, the pastoral industry and of course, fire. Aboriginal and natural ecologists are working together to promote biodiversity in northern and central Australia—see Rose (1995).

‘The Clearing,’ to which we shall turn shortly. The ribbon speaks to cultural practices attuned to the coordination and regulatory functions within plants and animals assisting survival in their environments, and the collective memories of these practices. This fusion speaks directly to the difficulties that face inhabitants of this planet’s continent most prone to fire, subject to increasing doubts and large-scale fires owing to human-induced climate change. The ribbon, therefore, is a hybrid narrative of nature and culture, of flora, fauna, human and ecosystem flowing together with the grammar of indigenous seasons. The ribbon promotes a sense of change that humans can function within before visitors experience the final ‘band’ of the gallery deeply warping this relationship in the human intervention zone. A preface to ‘The Clearing,’ the complex ribbon ends poignantly with three words signing off the story of the seasons indexed by climate in ‘Biderap’: ‘hot dry weather.’

Melancholic Environmental Memorial

‘Hot dry weather’, is a sentence that, in the Australian collective imagination, alludes not only to the recent drought but also to the memories of disastrous fires, particularly, in the case of Victorians, to ‘Black Friday’ (1939) and ‘Ash Wednesday’ (1983). Such memories, redolent with fear on the part of those who lived through or remember family accounts of these events is now even sharper, as most Australians remember the equally deadly 2009 ‘Black Saturday’ fires. Black Saturday is a name that clearly continues the tradition of representing intense fires that destroy entire communities and in which people, as well as forests and their inhabitants lose their lives, as one of Armageddon. Fire, then, is strongly associated with the Australian climate and part of the natural cycle. Increasingly, however, it is our own role in the creation of these fires that is being recognized, as the implications of human relationships with ecologies are better understood. If, in 1939, the Commissioner for the Royal Inquiry into the Black Friday Fires could say that Australians had not yet lived long enough to appreciate the need for collective knowledge on the role of fire in the Australian ecology and our own role in

causing them (Griffiths, 2001, p. vii; 136), we are now building a memory bank that is slowly forcing us to face up to our own role in accelerating climate change—in this case by losing the carbon sinks which such forests represent. While we are at some distance from what Dawson (2013) names ‘a judicious use of fire’ (97)—following Gammage’s idea of ‘a planned, precise, fine-grained local caring’ (2)—‘The Clearing’ uses memory to encourage us to acknowledge British colonization’s role in the clearance of these forests and, alongside it, in the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands, which we might remember when these hideous events are invoked. The delicate balance of this forest ecology, itself premised on a sustainable use of the forest by indigenous people is, during the colonial and post-colonial period radically upset and increasing fires are one of its results.

In the gallery, this realisation starts with a memorial space to the impact of fire. Linked to the previous climate band by the continuation of the sinuous path that now divides ‘The Clearing’ from an ashen memorial space to the Ash trees, it is here that we come to appreciate, for the first time, the regenerative and destructive force of fire. The image of the world’s end is conjured up in the words ‘hot dry weather’ coming to life in two video presentations built into the trunk of a fire blackened tree; the first in a series of such tree trunks that, collectively, make a memorial to the loss of the ash forest through increasingly intense fires that do not allow the seedlings to reach full maturity, thus losing their own ability to regenerate after the next fire. While the first video explains the regenerative power of fire, the second makes manifest the association between fire and fear, collapsing time and collective memories in a rendition of historical footage of destruction, devastation, loss and survival from the three major fires within living memory. There, the speed and intensity of these fires are repeated as if anew to each community, on whose faces we can read the shock and horror of what was happening to them and their relationship to place. The remainder of this memorial space is, in many ways, an attempt to insure against such memory loss and to suggest that we have it within our power to avoid such catastrophes despite living on a hot dry continent. While the blacked trees stand like totem poles on a grey, ash-like ground, their blackened surfaces a silent testimony to the destructive force of fire, horizontal stellae beneath them house

little seedlings, symbolic of the regenerative power within fire. In one of them, though, we are told that an ash tree does not reach maturity until it is 300 to 400 years old. At another ‘gravesite’ we are told that if fires are too frequent the saplings will not reach the stage where their seeds will germinate again, making fire a permanent killer. Griffiths (2001) reminds us that ‘mountain ash forests perversely need a catastrophe to survive’ (188); but the increased frequency of fires and the changing conditions of forests in the last two hundred years signals danger: they are now thicker, and, in the absence of Aborigines and small marsupials, are ‘especially vulnerable’ (28). The real possibility that permanent death by fire might be occurring is implied in the list of fires over the last two centuries at a Memorial for the most recent of these—a lone chimney that is all that remains from a nineteenth-century homestead in the Kinglake area of Victoria. Added to the gallery as an impromptu memorial during the immediate aftermath of the February 2009 fires, it becomes both a memorial and a memory bank for all those other destructive fires.¹⁵ For it is here that it becomes clear that catastrophic fires have become regular occurrences since colonisation, with fires in 1851, 1865, 1898, 1926, 1939, 1983 and 2009. Forests affected by these fires clearly do not have a chance to self-regenerate.

¹⁵ See Dale-Hallett et al. (2015) for an account of the collecting project that occurred in the immediate aftermath of this fire, one of whose aims was to ‘establish a chronology that could challenge the concept of “unprecedented,” “would never happen again,” and “one in a 100 year event”—terms that have appeared regularly in public discourse since February 2009’ (534).



Figure 3 - The Kinglake Chimney installation, Forest Gallery, by Benjamin Heally with permission of Museum Victoria

The increasing intensity of fires, however, is not the only pressure point affecting these forests. For on the other side of the sinuous curve defining the memorial to the after effects of fire, ‘The Clearing’ houses its own memorial—this time to the loss of trees through deforestation as a result of human activity. A series of grey ironbark trunks, with notches cut into them, stand as silent memorials to the practices of loggers who could only see the forest as a resource to be harvested. On those tree trunks are a number of historical images, alternatively documenting our admiration of the sublime nature of these forests, our sense of fear and cultural disorientation in a landscape that seemed to reflect only our melancholia and greed alongside our hope that knowledge might show us the way forward. There is something comforting about melancholy. It is a feeling of pensive sadness in which one can dwell; it is a state of being enveloped. Unlike numbness through depression, or hopelessness in grief, sorrow has purpose beyond its fleeting feeling of enclosure; a sustained directionless mood that is open to, or receptive

to knowledge. At times it is invoked, or called upon as an aesthetic emotion that follows cultural disorientation but which does not speak to an obvious cause for the feeling (cf. Brady (2003)). The Forest Gallery, contextualizes melancholy, relating the emotion to the symbolic dimension of loss in ‘The Clearing,’ in turn connecting the intense wildfires—a product of European occupation (Griffiths 2001, 28)—to the displacement of indigenous peoples in ways that open up the heart as well as the mind, opening them up to knowledge and to an atmospheric relation, creating what Witcomb (2015) has called a ‘pedagogy of feeling’¹⁶. This pedagogy is given its final twist in the final memorial—this time to the displacement of indigenous people—a memorial that affects the appraisal of this pensive, melancholic aesthetic emotion.¹⁷

At the centre of the very back of the space lies an alluring plaque that the visitor comes across while looking out onto the open green space behind the museum and drawing in the fresh air of north Melbourne with their back to ‘The Clearing’, the darkness cast aside temporarily. Plaque or tombstone? It is hard to tell. It is one of only three horizontal registers in the space dominated by the two groups of incredibly tall tree trunks (above) that draw the eyes up into the rainforest canopy and out into the sky.¹⁸ It can be quite easily missed. This slate-black elongated diamond-shaped sign is raised two feet off the ground and requires the visitor to bend down, intimately and bodily implicating

¹⁶ For Witcomb, a ‘pedagogy of feeling’ in the context of museums is an interpretative strategy that turns the civil space of the museum towards a critical engagement with the ways in which collective narratives and memories disable the construction of our futures. Alternatively, visitors might take their affective experiences into the realm of citizen action; essential to this pedagogy is the use of affective immersive spaces to open up visitors to engage in critical modes of thinking through feeling one’s way towards complexity.

¹⁷ Ute Frevert (2012) argues that melancholy is a ‘lost’ emotion: along with other emotions, its prominence changes throughout historical periods, and it has been ‘lost in translation to a new emotional state called depression’ (36).

¹⁸ The other horizontal markers are a table dedicated to maps of the area which doubles as a workspace for educational programs, and rectangular seed boxes (described above as stellae), which lie beneath each charred tree trunk.

themselves in the stories inscribed on the surface, to reengage their experience with this final testimony. There are two semantic spaces on the plaque's surface, divided by a flowing line evoking the local river and season ribbon, and a jagged line evoking colonial cartography and dispossession. On the left-hand side is a photomontage of homesteads and Aboriginal labourers in the forest clearing industry of the late eighteenth century.¹⁹ On the right-hand side is a timeline, running vertically from 1835 at the top (when an unlawful treaty was signed between indigenous groups and the Australian grazier John Batman) to 1998 at the bottom (marking the purchase of the last freehold property of a former Aboriginal station, Coranderrk, by the Indigenous Land Corporation). Stunningly, this artwork represents a short history of one slice of colonial conflict with profound effects within the damaged landscape that surrounds it: from the founding of the settlement in Melbourne and establishment of a new colony, through indigenous resistance to forced removal from their ancestral lands to a point when it was possible for the Kulin to purchase title to a piece of their territory—and by implication not yet possible for them to claim that title. Key dates are numbered with supporting sentences offering a glossed account of land clearance and indigenous displacement: the two are brought together while the looped video footage of bushfires run on the TV screens that visitors must turn away from when reading the inscriptions.

The gallery is repoliticizing the representation of nature and the inherently dualistic discourse of colonialism. There is one long quotation tilted on its side running along the timeline, which, when the body is adjusted to read it, enables the trees marked by bushfire to enter into the visitor's peripheral vision: 'You got to know your father's country. Yarra is my father's country. There's no mountains for me on the Murray.' This is the voice of William (Ngurungaeta) Barak, the last traditional elder of the Wurundjeri

¹⁹ One photograph, 'The Yara Tribe starting for the Acheron, 1862' by Charles Walter commemorates one of the crossways of the Blacks' Spur by the Kulin people. Griffiths (2001) writes that this corridor is named after the Woi wurrung and the Daung wurrung people 'who used it to travel between their territories and who, in the early 1860s, made the journey several times through the tall forests in quest of a permanent home, a safe refuge amidst the maelstrom of European invasion' (50).

clan, renowned for his beautiful artworks depicting indigenous life and encounters with Europeans, said to have been present during John Batman's 'purchase' of Melbourne, and a key player in the Aboriginal resistance movement.²⁰ The soundscape is of birds and fire, the view is of burnt trees and memory poles, the voice is that of displacement. The storyline threads eye and ear together and integrates indigenous experience into the site of memory transforming the whole gallery into an overwhelming melancholic memorial to change: of climate, of peoples, of place, in turn pointing to humanity as a force of nature. It is worth slowing down here. Brady (2003) argues that melancholy is 'is no less complex a phenomenon than sublimity.' And it is true: we locate ourselves within a material representation of not only a value judgement, but a 'state of mind' (Shaw, 2006, p. 1) as we stand in the confusion of ashes that lies in our wake, a bricolage of signifiers for death and life shaping our consciousness while marking the limits of reason and its expression. Here, an affective and aesthetic space points to a 'discontinuity of the subject's conscious experience with the non-intentionality of emotion' (Clough, 2010, p. 206). While conflating our environmental futures and cultural memories, the destabilizing of the visitors' sense of a secure self is now spelled out in full on a geological canvas with relatively recent human destruction affectively corrupting an organicist space and impacting on our senses to the point that we are sad, guilty, puzzled—and, within all this, hopeful. 'The Clearing' stimulates conflicted emotions from within a site of environmental witness: the melancholic acknowledgement of states of emergence and loss leaves the visitor dispossessed of security. The resultant space in one's identity is filled with a guilt that is alert to the significance of feelings and bonds that come from telling stories with these contexts. The forest's secret resides within this very gap between property and belonging. Ultimately the gallery's self-production, the autopoetics of the forest ecology, is framed by human conflict wherein the circuit from affect to

²⁰ Victorian Aboriginal nations practice a ceremony called 'tanderrum'— sometimes known as Freedom of the Bush— a diplomatic rite involving the exchange of gifts allowing for temporary access and use of resources (including land) by foreign people, as signified by the use of Eucalypt leaves in the ceremony. Museologists and historians have considered whether the signing of the Batman treaty might have been interpreted as a tanderrum ceremony (see Griffiths (2001), 50-51).

subjectivity is reverse engineered. Reproduced within a museum space that challenges its own boundary conditions, a site of destruction circulating outside and between bodies and organisms within an historically specific mode of organisation—the museum—the ‘forest gallery’ compound is an experience that scaffolds and elongates emotional processes for the visitor; as an installation, it excitingly engenders a model of curatorial practice transformed into a living witness of change, of climate and fire. Placing these two coordinates together, the gallery is an imminent intersubjective technology grasping the imperceptible dynamism of ecological affect.

Concluding Thoughts

Graham Huggan (2015) negotiates an all too common ecocritical persuasion—that the sources and manifestations of climate change are difficult to represent—to argue that ‘climate change lends itself to a *futural aesthetics*’.²¹ Huggan’s position arises during his examination of Ursula’s Heise’s sense that apocalyptic and risk perspectives on climate change raise different sets of aesthetic as well as ethical questions. The former emphasizes uncertainty and indeterminacy, while the latter invokes holistic communities, harmony and self-regenerating ecosystems (Heise (2008) 142; Huggan (2015) 88).²² Understood as a whole, The Forest Gallery in Melbourne oscillates between indeterminacy and regeneration, which, in our analysis, positions the visitor in a complex site of mixed emotions that instructs them to think hard on their political position with respect to colonial relations, fire and climate in Australia. The lone chimney in ‘The Clearing’ attempts to bring this ongoing, understated site of cultural conflict and emotional turmoil back home, as it were. Newell et al. (in press) argue that ‘People need to find ways to speak of change that they relate to their lives’:

²¹ He is drawing from Brady (2014).

²² Heise is unpacking Buell’s (1996) sense of dwelling in crisis.

Change is as crucial as climate, and we need more participants to enrich this big conversation of our times. Change... highly affective—often threatening, worrying, stressful. Economic changes, environmental changes, technological changes and social changes are all multiplying and cross-magnifying, and these are very hard to make sense of from within the moment. We need a historical sense of where they are coming from, numerical ways to compare them, and emotional support to live with them” (6).

Examples and stories of changes *within* the first three bands of the Forest Gallery set up the emotional exploration of changes *to* the climate in the Forest Gallery; the catalyst for linking these is evident in the season ribbon that defines and shapes the ‘climate’ section of the gallery. The season band, once read in the context of ‘The Clearing’, might suggest ‘a tale of remnants of indigenous biodiversity and cultural memory’ (Dawson, 2013, p. 104); however, it represents one way, as Huggan has remarked regarding a different medium, ‘of illustrating the scale effects currently being produced by global warming, and of suggesting—without falling into a limiting form of moral prescriptivism—the ethical responsibilities that come with increased awareness of the possible consequences of climate change’ (2015, p. 101). And it is this capacity for re-reading and re-interpreting separate sections of the gallery, a living forest ecosystem, in the light of the memorial space, that connects the whole space together. These connections are made in concert with larger intellectual and affective connections: of emotions to reason, aesthetics to politics, history to environmental change. Perhaps these all allude to a larger metaphor that the gallery embodies: the non-representational differences and the ethical entanglements of natural evolution and social construction. Environmental history, then, offered the Melbourne Museum a way in which to bring a wide variety of disciplinary knowledge together within the one space in ways that enable visitors to learn not only about the ecology of the mountain ash forests within a history of change but to connect these to the ways in which our own species—humans—have played, and continue to play, a key role in the process of climate change. In doing so, the Museum has also found a way to represent the unrepresentable, and to do so within an aesthetic practice that has as much recourse to the past as to the future.

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